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U.S.-SOVIET RELATIONS:
THRESHOLD OF A NEW ERA

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Arnold L. Horelick

U.S.-SOVIET RELATIONS: THRESHOLD OF A NEW ERA

As the decade of the 1980s closed, the United States and the Soviet Union appeared finally to have mastered their forty-year-old conflict. At the Malta summit between Presidents George Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev, the convergence of American and Soviet positions on most agenda items was unprecedented. Their relationship seemed likely to develop with minimum tension, low risk and, prospectively, at greatly reduced cost.

But precisely at the moment when they seem to have perfected their methods for managing the conflicts of the cold war era, that era has abruptly ended. The finely honed instruments of conflict management face early obsolescence. Instead, policymakers in both capitals face a new international politics in which their bipolar competition will no longer provide the dominant framework for ordering the system and disciplining the behavior of states. For the United States the adjustment will surely be difficult, but incomparably less so than for the Soviet Union.

II

By every measure of conventional postwar scorekeeping, 1989 was the year in which the West won the cold war. During the fall and winter, communist rule was toppled or irretrievably compromised in the three key northern-tier states of the Warsaw Pact—Poland, the German Democratic Republic and Czechoslovakia. The Communist Party itself, not to speak of its “leading role,” was extinguished in a fourth country, Hungary, and was on the slippery slope of multiparty reform even in Bulgaria. Only in Romania did the communist leader Ceaușescu attempt to hold the line by force, but by year’s end he had been executed and his entire Politburo placed under arrest.

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Moscow, moreover, seemed helpless or unwilling to prevent the sudden deterioration of its most sensitive geopolitical position. The Soviet Union was immersed in a profound domestic crisis that threatened both the political stability and the territorial integrity of the state. The Soviet economy was in a shambles. Discontent and pessimism were endemic. In Moscow, supporters and critics competed in making estimates of how many months Gorbachev still had left in which to deliver on perestroika's promise before a "revolution from below," a military coup or a hard-line conservative backlash swept both him and his program away, or compelled him to suspend *demokratizatsia* and *glasnost*.

In foreign policy, according to the old calculus, Gorbachev may have gained some breathing space for the beleaguered Soviet Union, but only at a high cost: surrendering the "socialist gains" in Eastern Europe, abandoning Third World friends and clients to U.S.-supported counterrevolution, and making an uninterrupted series of grossly asymmetrical arms control concessions, which after five years still had not been seriously reciprocated by the West. Thus, when he arrived at Malta for his first meeting with the new American president, Gorbachev held the weakest geopolitical hand any Soviet leader has had to play in a summit meeting. To a Soviet "old thinker," Bush's praise of Gorbachev and his suspension of a few minor discriminatory economic restrictions were merely the cosmetic part of "rollback with a human face."

There was evidence at year's end of direct criticism of Gorbachev's foreign policy from within the Central Committee. The Western world, however, was lavish in its praise of his statesmanship and diplomacy and not at all inclined to gloat over the crumbling of the Soviet empire or to take satisfaction from the U.S.S.R.'s domestic crisis. In this view, Gorbachev had not lost the cold war for the Soviet Union; he simply had stopped playing the game according to the old rules. His performance was therefore to be judged by a set of new, distinctly different non-zero-sum rules that gave the highest grades for self-restraint and unilateral arms reductions.

Never mind that Gorbachev's capacity to play the game by the old rules had been crippled by the failure of the Soviet economy and the crumbling of communist rule in Eastern Europe; never mind that even the greatest strategic gain of the cold war years—the achievement of nuclear parity with the United States—had failed to yield military or political benefits

remotely commensurate with its enormous costs. Having boldly concluded the game was not worth the candle, Gorbachev cut his losses—in some cases brilliantly making a virtue of the hardest necessity and redefining the rules so that what might have counted as defeats and retreats became bold initiatives and daring challenges to old-thinking partners. Indeed, since according to the now virtually universally accepted view that Gorbachev's survival is key to sustaining the more benign global trends, inflicting defeats on him could hardly any longer be the object of Western policy.

In the Soviet Union, however, it was a year that saw the steady erosion of Gorbachev's popularity as perestroika continued to founder, straining the patience of an increasingly assertive and critical public. Paradoxically, Gorbachev's personal power position in Kremlin politics not only failed to be adversely affected, but was appreciably strengthened. Fearing that any wave of discontent strong enough to topple Gorbachev would wash them away as well, conservatives in the party elite had little alternative but to give him grudging support, even as he systematically removed their most prominent spokesmen from the Politburo or demoted them. For radicals and liberals, Gorbachev also remained, as the late Andrei Sakharov described him, "the only realistic alternative leader."

At year's end Gorbachev was nevertheless beleaguered, playing for time and fighting fires, delaying implementation of the most critical parts of perestroika, which were bound to be painful and unpopular. Without such changes in the economic incentive system, however, there could be no breakthroughs and no self-sustaining growth. Even more precariously, he also was walking a tightrope in dealing with the rebellious nationalities, employing all of his persuasive powers to slow down, if not to turn back, a swelling secessionist tide in Lithuania. Following the example of the Baltic states, militant popular fronts were emerging all along the periphery of the Soviet Union. Moldavia was in the throes of anti-Russian ethnic self-assertion, bound to be exacerbated by the fall of Ceaușescu in the Romanian homeland. Most menacing from Moscow's perspective, a popular front was growing in the Ukraine as well. In other republics there were repeated instances of inter-ethnic violence, unchecked in the Caucasus and festering in Central Asia.

Even Gorbachev's most positive domestic achievement of the

year, the election of a Congress of People's Deputies and the formation of a new Supreme Soviet, was a mixed blessing for him. Gorbachev clearly sought to create for himself and his programs a broad parliamentary base of political support that he could employ to whip the still indispensable party into line. But the March elections, even though partially rigged, revealed a disaffection from the Communist Party so deep and so widespread that its effectiveness as an instrument of rule was called seriously into question. Moreover, the new forum became a genuine cockpit for debate and conflict that, on the whole, did not enhance Gorbachev's authority or prestige in the country. At the end of the year, Gorbachev found himself defending the constitutionally mandated and symbolically crucial "leading role of the party" against surprisingly strong opposition in the Congress. In comparison to the "socialist countries" of Eastern Europe, which lagged far behind the Soviet Union in political reform at the beginning of 1989, by the year's end only in the U.S.S.R. was the Communist Party still clinging doggedly to its political monopoly.

Ironically, viewed against the background of Gorbachev's forthcoming and welcome departures in foreign policy, his troubles at home helped him abroad. They encouraged the evolution of the Bush Administration's policy from skeptical, watchful waiting to broad engagement with the Soviet Union. The president finally endorsed both Gorbachev and his policies. Amid mounting evidence that perestroika might be failing, Bush claimed to be second to none in supporting it.

III

During the waning years of President Reagan's second term, the running battle over how to deal with Gorbachev's Soviet Union was finally resolved. There were those centered in the office of the secretary of defense who had been the "squeezers." They opposed any relaxation of competitive pressure on the Soviet Union, which they saw as the key to forcing the Kremlin into global retreat and compelling it to choose between outright abandonment of communism or collapse. There was another group, in the State Department, the "dealers," who saw the shifting global correlation of forces and Gorbachev's preoccupation with internal reform as an opportunity to reach arms control and regional agreements on unprecedentedly favorable terms. As Soviet reforms deepened, the "dealers" even grew prepared for such agreements

to help Gorbachev as well. By the end of the Reagan Administration, the president's own growing confidence in Gorbachev and Secretary of State George Shultz's persistent efforts to overcome right-wing attachment to the militantly anti-Soviet stance of Reagan's first term had prevailed. "Squeezing" Gorbachev had effectively dropped out of the operative spectrum.

By the time George Bush took office in January, virtually the entire American foreign policy establishment, including its most prominent conservative members, were "dealers" of one kind or another. There were, however, still important differences. Many observers outside the new administration were prepared to deal quickly with Moscow, and for larger stakes. They were not only ready but eager to help Gorbachev in the bargain. Others, including most of the senior policy figures in the new administration, wanted to move much more cautiously.

At first President Bush and the experienced, pragmatic foreign-policy team around him still had doubts about Gorbachev's intentions. There was a deep skepticism about his chances for survival, not to speak of his chances for succeeding with perestroika, and a gnawing anxiety that his diplomacy was loosening the cohesion and resolution of the Western alliance. In general, the new administration seemed to place a higher priority on preventing the premature dismantling of tried-and-true security structures that had held a hostile Soviet Union at bay for forty years than on risking new initiatives with Gorbachev. For example, in a television interview just prior to Bush's inauguration, Brent Scowcroft, the new national security adviser, questioned whether Gorbachev's real intention was not to weaken the Western alliance and drive a wedge between the United States and its allies.

Initially, no major policy pronouncements on the Soviet Union were made, pending completion of a "comprehensive" national security policy review. The review, however, dragged on for months and reportedly ended up endorsing the unexciting goal of "status quo plus." Administration policymakers seemed preoccupied with the arcane alliance politics of short-range nuclear missile modernization and arms control negotiations, in which Soviet diplomacy was still perceived as a threat to be parried, rather than an opportunity to be explored. This attitude provoked a growing domestic criticism of the administration's slowness and timidity in dealing with the bigger

picture. Some European allies also were urging Washington to respond more effectively to Gorbachev's initiatives, if only because they were attracting wide public support in Europe.

In the spring, the president dealt with East-West relations in a series of five speeches that grew progressively more positive in tone. In a speech in May in New London, Connecticut, Bush previewed his administration's new watchword, declaring it was time to "move beyond containment" and to integrate the Soviet Union into the "community of nations." These new slogans in fact turned out to foreshadow a policy shift that was already under way. But the new policy was so entwined with conditions and reservations that it made relatively little impression at the time. More attention was paid to the president's speech in April in Hamtramck, Michigan, where he unveiled a modest program of aid to Poland and Hungary that was widely criticized as insufficient.

Meanwhile, the trials and tribulations of perestroika were making Gorbachev all the more impatient for achievements in foreign policy and arms control that would permit larger and faster transfers of resources from the swollen military sector to the sputtering civilian economy. In Moscow, some Soviet officials were expressing nostalgia for the good old days of Reagan and Shultz.

A major milestone in the evolution of the Bush Administration's policy was Secretary of State James A. Baker's first meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze in Moscow in early May. During that visit Gorbachev presented Baker with specific numbers for several categories of weapons to be reduced in the new Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) negotiations. The numbers were so close to NATO's figures as to convince administration officials that the Soviets were serious about concluding an agreement on terms highly favorable to NATO.

In response to this initiative, President Bush, at a NATO summit in Brussels at the end of May, laid out his own conventional arms reductions proposals. He called for deep Soviet reductions and a break in the logjam that had developed in Vienna over whether to include aircraft and stationed-troop levels in the negotiations.

A second Baker-Shevardnadze meeting, in Wyoming in September, was marked by unusual cordiality, and further accelerated the movement of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union. The meeting produced new Soviet concessions on a

key stalemated issue in the Geneva negotiations on strategic arms reductions: Moscow offered to "de-link" a final agreement in the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks from resolution of the deadlocked defense and space issues. This seemed to remove a major obstacle to the conclusion of a new START agreement by the late spring or early summer of 1990, and cleared the way for an agreement to hold a full-fledged Bush-Gorbachev summit during that period. In fact, private exchanges between Bush and Gorbachev had already begun on the holding of the "informal" summit at Malta.

Those secret exchanges must have been greatly influenced by developments in Eastern Europe. In announcing the scheduling of the Malta meeting, President Bush acknowledged that during his July visit to Eastern Europe, Solidarity leaders in Poland and reformers in Hungary had linked their prospects to Gorbachev's survival; they had urged the president to meet sooner rather than later with the Soviet leader. Six weeks after Bush's visit, Tadeusz Mazowiecki, a Catholic intellectual, was confirmed as prime minister in Warsaw to head a Solidarity-dominated coalition government. A month later, thousands of East Germans were pouring out of their country through Hungary and Czechoslovakia into the Federal Republic of Germany, and pro-democracy demonstrations were breaking out in major cities of the German Democratic Republic. Against this dramatic background Secretary Baker gave two speeches in mid-October, spelling out a U.S. policy of engagement with the Soviet Union. Not only would the United States support perestroika, but the administration had concluded that Gorbachev's success was itself in America's fundamental interest, and was prepared to provide Moscow with advice and technical assistance to help restructure the Soviet economy.

What was new and decidedly different about Baker's October speeches was his treatment of what had become the most hotly debated issue of U.S. policy toward the Soviet Union: how to deal with uncertainties about Gorbachev's survival and the ultimate fate of perestroika. Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and Deputy National Security Adviser Robert Gates in particular had publicly rated the prospects for both Gorbachev and perestroika as poor, in contexts suggesting that such uncertainty was a strong reason for the administration to proceed with the greatest caution. Secretary Baker stood that position on its head. He asserted that uncertainty about the fate of Gorbachev's reform program should provide "all the

more reason, not less, for us to seize the present opportunity" to make agreements to cut back superpower military arsenals and reduce the Soviet threat. This reflected the administration's recognition that it was in the West's interest to move expeditiously toward concluding the arms control agreements now under negotiation, regardless of the uncertainty about the future of Gorbachev and perestroika. If Gorbachev survived and perestroika prospered, the groundwork would be laid for moving further toward institutionalizing a much more stable and less confrontational military relationship. Once the Soviet Union had destroyed nuclear weapons and withdrew or dismantled conventional forces as required by the agreements, it would be difficult, costly and time-consuming for any future Soviet leadership, even one more hostile or assertive, to reverse the process. The stage thus was set for Malta; the Bush Administration had made its choice.

The collapse of communist domination of Eastern Europe had made a crucial difference. It provided dramatic, tangible evidence of a change both in the policies and geopolitical position of the U.S.S.R. that could not possibly be explained away as a ruse or a temporary tactical retreat which might leave the Soviet Union free to resume the old struggle after a respite. The crisis in Eastern Europe reinforced a Western perception that real strategic opportunities lay ahead, not only in arms control but in political arrangements that could fundamentally improve European security—the principal area of competition and the heart of the cold war. It suddenly became critical for the West to see Eastern Europe through a period of free elections and in the process to reassure Moscow that its security would not be threatened.

IV

It was not surprising that at Malta both Bush and Gorbachev used almost identical language in proclaiming that their two countries were "at the threshold of a new era." But Malta was not the place, and the first week in December was too soon, for the two leaders to exchange architectural plans for a new European political order. The Berlin Wall had been breached only three weeks before, and the outcome in East Germany was still very much in question. Chancellor Helmut Kohl had placed the reunification of Germany on the active political agenda only a few days before Malta; there had not yet been face-to-face meetings between the president and other alliance

leaders, and the United States was determined to avoid even the slightest hint of another Yalta.

Going into Malta, the Soviet and American leaders had slogans, not visions, and much less blueprints, for a new European order. While Gorbachev had surrounded his long-standing call for a "Common European Home" with thousands of words, there was not much more substance to his theme than to President Bush's more recent call for a "Europe Whole and Free." Moreover, if there was more to Gorbachev's thinking about the design of a "Common European Home" than he had revealed before Malta, the sudden changes in Eastern Europe almost certainly would have required a searching reexamination.

Gorbachev himself had inspired the change in Eastern Europe, which he subsequently acknowledged as inevitable. What he clearly had hoped for was to spread perestroika to Eastern Europe, where a wave of reform would be instituted by rejuvenated and restructured Communist parties that would "renew socialism." His vision was a voluntary community of Eastern states pursuing common socialist agendas and led by like-minded reformers. Those states would still be linked, but far more loosely than in the past. For enduring geopolitical and economic reasons, the alliance with the Soviet Union would continue, but in a less militarized and more politicized grouping that would occupy the Eastern wing of the European "common home."

This vision had already been upset by the transfer of power to Solidarity in Poland, and had been completely overtaken by events in East Germany and Czechoslovakia. Gorbachev acknowledged that the Communists had "lost" the confidence of the people. The hope that some vague common commitment might still emerge to a democratized version of socialism may not have been entirely abandoned in Moscow, but the prospects were poor, and fading. Moscow had to look more and more to a geopolitical rationale for maintaining security ties between Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Its policy had to be to make such a rationale persuasive and acceptable to its allies. To do that Gorbachev had to rely on the West's shared concern about stability and enlist Western support for a "calm and peaceful" transition in Eastern Europe.

At some point, Gorbachev may have had a game plan for meshing the interrelated processes of demilitarization in the West and reform in the East. The revolt of Eastern Europe,

however, destroyed whatever balance Gorbachev had hoped to maintain between these two aims. Gorbachev must surely have understood that his unmistakeable support for reform in Eastern Europe, together with his unilateral force reductions and proposed CFE cuts, would produce more independent allies and weaken Soviet control of the Warsaw Pact—a trend confirmed by the evolution of events in Poland and Hungary.

But earlier, in December 1988 when he announced the decision to cut troops unilaterally, Gorbachev probably hoped—not implausibly—that rapid changes in the West's perception of a Soviet threat would stimulate a comparable weakening of NATO's military efforts and cohesion. By the summer and fall of 1989 changes in Eastern Europe were completely outstripping the more careful arms reduction process on which Gorbachev may have been relying. Moreover, by November it was clear that the issue of German reunification would have to be faced not at the end of a gradual process of change but at a much earlier stage, and under conditions in which the security structures of the East were disintegrating while NATO remained wholly intact. Once the issue of German reunification was raised, it became even more crucial for Gorbachev to emphasize to the uneasy Western allies of the F.R.G. their common interest with Moscow in maintaining stability in Europe during the transition, and to encourage a multilateral approach to the German question such that Moscow would not be obliged to be the sole naysayer.

v

The emergence of the German question must have caused second thoughts in Moscow about continuing the Soviet campaign to dissolve the opposing alliances and to seek the withdrawal of foreign forces from Europe. In such a reappraisal, Gorbachev was no doubt encouraged by reassuring evidence that the United States and its allies were not seeking to undercut Moscow during its time of troubles in Eastern Europe, and that they too preferred a stable orderly transition, rather than a precipitous upheaval, to end the division of Europe. In the West as well as in the East there was a clear preference for stability: "This is not the time," Gorbachev told the French foreign minister, "to destroy the established international political institutions."

While the superpowers did in fact have certain common

interests in a stable process, their objectives were a mix of overlapping interests and potential new conflicts.

For the West the approach to a new European security order is likely to be to preserve and strengthen Western institutions that have proved so effective during the cold war, and to ensure that the democratic Eastern countries that may emerge have an opportunity for broader and deeper relations with the West. The Western design will probably be to ensure that a reunified Germany would remain strongly anchored in the West.

In stressing gradualism, emphasizing stability and calling for the adaptation and transformation of existing institutions, the West's approach is not incompatible with the Soviet desire to play for time. For the Soviet Union there can only be the hope that, by slowing down the process of change in the East and buying time, Moscow can still keep open the option for developing some kind of community of interests between a vaguely socialist Eastern Europe and a reconstructed Soviet Union. On this basis, the Soviet Union as well as the East Europeans could begin to share in the economic and technological benefits of closer ties with the West. Being left out altogether is Moscow's nightmare.

Thus far Moscow and the West have demonstrated a common interest in peaceful and gradual change in Eastern Europe. That the West should wish change in Eastern Europe to be peaceful is hardly surprising, but the implication that to be peaceful it must also be gradual reflects a Western sensitivity, which Moscow obviously shares, to the potential for a destabilizing crisis. This concern was dramatically demonstrated by Secretary Baker's quick visit in mid-December to East Berlin, where he expressed support for the reformist policies of the shaky new Communist prime minister, Hans Modrow. Baker reportedly made the visit on the strength of the advice of the U.S. ambassador to the G.D.R. that chances for a peaceful transition to democracy in East Germany would be better if the Modrow government survived.

A second area of common interests is likely to be an orderly deliberate process to reduce military forces in Europe, to be negotiated and implemented through CFE by existing alliance groupings.

For the Soviet Union, the CFE process provides a vehicle for securing at least some reciprocal returns from the West for reductions in swollen Soviet forces. Moscow wishes desperately

to make substantial force reductions for its own reasons, but a second round of deep unilateral cuts might be politically impossible for Gorbachev. Moreover, the process of negotiating, implementing and verifying a CFE agreement provides the Warsaw Pact with a *raison d'être* that serves what is perhaps the only remaining common interest in the Eastern alliance. The CFE process can also establish a pace for Soviet withdrawals as a result of negotiations with the West, rather than of potentially explosive bilateral negotiations between Moscow and East European capitals.

The United States will seek to lock in an overwhelmingly favorable reductions agreement by substantially eliminating Soviet conventional advantages through asymmetrical reductions that only marginally affect NATO force levels. Moreover, such an agreement would help forestall premature dismantling of NATO, dampen pressures for much larger withdrawals of U.S. forces and buy insurance against reversals and new instabilities in the East.

Thus arms control, if given time to unfold, would tend to perpetuate the two alliances in Europe; any movement toward German reunification would be contained within this framework. Gorbachev has explicitly argued for retaining existing institutions in formulations that do not distinguish between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. Officially, the United States has taken no position on the desirability of the Warsaw Pact's survival. Nevertheless, the CFE process that the United States and NATO have continued to endorse serves to stabilize the Warsaw Pact and give it a rationale that democratic governments in Eastern Europe might also be able to accept and use to defend against nationalist anti-Soviet electoral pressures at home.

On the other hand, both Moscow and Washington have talked, in strikingly similar language, about the transformation of their alliances from military organizations to more "political" ones. For both this is a means of giving their alliances, and their leading roles in them, a new dispensation in a world in which the alliances' primary military functions are waning in importance.

But prospects for a political NATO and a political Warsaw Pact are quite different. NATO is necessarily a political alliance. While there may be some resistance, especially from the French, to permitting Atlanticist NATO to intrude on the political prerogatives of the European Community, the transformation of NATO into an alliance with growing political functions faces no profound obstacles.

To transform the Warsaw Pact into a more "political" organ is a much more dubious proposition. As Soviet European specialists have acknowledged, the political infrastructure of the Warsaw Treaty Organization is poorly developed. It lacks a permanent political staff headquarters; its highest political organs meet only rarely and for largely ceremonial purposes; and its most important political decisions in the past were made in party, not state, channels—a practice that has been overtaken by the collapse of ruling Communist parties in Eastern Europe.

VI

On the question of German reunification, the official objectives of the United States and the Soviet Union are widely divergent, if not directly contradictory. The United States, along with all of the Western allies, has long been committed to supporting the goal of German unity so long as it is the result of the "free self-determination of the German people." Gorbachev and Shevardnadze now also have endorsed the principle of "self-determination of peoples and states" and "freedom of choice" in Eastern Europe. But Moscow clearly hopes that the East Germans, exercising their right of free choice, will choose to remain a separate German state. For the time being the Soviet Union refuses to deal concretely with the contingency of a different choice. Gorbachev emphasizes the "existing realities" of the two German states and prefers to leave it to "history" to decide, implying that history is to be measured in large increments of time. For now, according to Moscow, the issue of German reunification is not on the agenda.

Moreover, just prior to the Malta summit the Bush administration added several other conditions, including that German reunification "should occur in the context of Germany's continued alignment with NATO." That was new; in the past, the emphasis had been almost exclusively on the democratic political organization of a unified German state. By attaching continued alignment with NATO to its formulation, the United States has laid out a resolution of the German question that is diametrically opposed to the official Soviet position. For the Soviets, reunification—if it is to occur at all—can only be envisioned in the context of a larger process of "overcoming the division of Europe," including the simultaneous dissolution of both NATO and the Warsaw Pact.

Yet while Moscow responded harshly to Chancellor Kohl's

10-point outline for reunification—which conspicuously failed to specify that a reunified Germany would remain aligned with NATO—the Soviets have not been visibly perturbed by the new American position. Indeed, it seems clear that, on the whole, Moscow welcomed the prompt intervention of the United States to slow down the momentum imparted to German reunification by the surprise unilateral Kohl initiative. The U.S. call for a unified Germany to remain in NATO is embedded in a set of other conditions, which, taken together, underline that the German question should not be decided by German states alone, and that other parties whose interests must be considered include, in addition to West Germany's NATO allies, the U.S.S.R. The U.S. formulation of conditions for German reunification, as Secretary Baker has suggested, may not be “a distasteful one to the Soviet Union.”

Thus, the U.S. position states that the achievement of German unity must be “peaceful and gradual, and part of a step-by-step process.” It must be in accord with the 1975 Helsinki agreements, which stipulated that the postwar boundaries of Europe are fixed and can be changed only by “peaceful negotiation.” In his remarks on the future of Europe at the post-Malta NATO summit in Brussels, President Bush added another principle that had not been included in the list announced by Secretary Baker before Malta, namely that reunification should occur “with due regard for the legal role and responsibilities of the Allied Powers.” While perhaps intended in the first instance to be responsive to the expressed interests of the British and French, that statement was the clearest U.S. endorsement yet of a legitimate Soviet role in resolving the question of German reunification. It was given symbolic expression soon after by the first formal meeting in 18 years of the U.S., Soviet, British and French ambassadors in Berlin, called on Soviet initiative ostensibly to discuss a two-year-old American proposal to improve air traffic safety and other Berlin issues.

Immediately after the fall of Honecker and the breaching of the Berlin Wall, there was concern in some Western capitals that Gorbachev might respond with a characteristic preemptive diplomatic strike. If he foresaw that East Germany would soon cease to be a viable state and that events might reach a point where reunification could only be prevented by force, Gorbachev might offer to withdraw Soviet troops entirely from the G.D.R. and accept the reunification of Germany in return for neutralization.

A proposal to trade German unity for neutralization has of course been in Moscow's portfolio since Stalin's "peace note" of March 1952. In the radically altered circumstances of late 1989, however, it loomed as a very risky and even less promising gambit for the Soviet Union. The collapse of communism in East Germany had gravely weakened Moscow's bargaining position. Playing the German card in these circumstances would have threatened to damage, fatally, those residual political forces in the G.D.R. that were prepared to hold out for a separate East German state.

Moreover, it was hard for the Soviets to know how such a preemptive offer might have played out in West German public opinion. The Bonn government would have either rejected it outright or redefined its terms to preserve German security ties to the West. Gorbachev knew that such a ploy would severely antagonize the United States and its NATO allies, who would regard it as an act of political warfare; it might perhaps have disrupted the entire pattern of European diplomacy so painstakingly constructed by Gorbachev and Shevardnadze. Finally, it was highly uncertain that the U.S.S.R. would be satisfied with the "success" that playing the German card might produce. With West Germany in such a powerful position and still so firmly anchored economically and politically to the West, even formal neutralization could not ensure a benign balance for Soviet interests.

Thus far Soviet intentions point in a rather different direction. Within days of the opening of crossing points in the Berlin Wall, Moscow began to put out strong signals that it was preparing not a preemptive diplomatic ploy but a political holding action. In meeting with the French, Italian and other West European diplomats and journalists, the Soviets sought to make common cause with those in the West alarmed by the sudden prospect of German reunification. Reunification, Moscow insisted, was not on the agenda. The existence of two German states was a "reality" that had to be accepted; "history," in some fashion, would decide.

The surprise unveiling of Kohl's reunification "outline," however, directly challenged Soviet efforts to keep the issue off the agenda. Had Gorbachev chosen to pursue it, Moscow might have explored the opening provided by Kohl's failure to call explicitly for keeping a unified Germany in NATO. Instead, the Soviet Union attacked Kohl frontally for preempting the German question, seeking to destabilize the G.D.R., and ignor-

ing the interests of other European powers. The Soviets vowed "to defend the G.D.R." against efforts from the outside to interfere with its right to choose a separate sovereign existence. Shevardnadze, during his visit to NATO headquarters, was even more emphatic in his opposition. Whether this position can be held after the May elections in East Germany remains a critical question for Gorbachev.

VII

In sum, the two powers have reaffirmed the CFE arms control process, endorsed the Helsinki framework, urged gradualism on the democratic governments of Eastern Europe and endorsed a role for the wartime Allied Powers in resolution of the German question.

Inevitably the question arises: Is the United States throwing Moscow a life preserver to keep the Warsaw Pact afloat in stormy waters in which it would otherwise soon drown? In other words, does a U.S. decision to use the CFE arms control forum and the two alliances as the instruments for managing the transition help to perpetuate and legitimize an Eastern alliance that is imploding? Would a better course be to seek to end the Warsaw Pact quickly while keeping NATO as insurance? This approach would argue, if not for dropping CFE altogether, then for concluding it quickly and stopping there, forgoing CFE II, and letting events take their course. This approach would also call for resisting any Soviet effort to draw the U.S. into a dialogue on management of the transition, discussion of a European settlement or, especially, joint four-power responsibilities for a peace treaty with Germany—all based on the two blocs.

There are clear dangers to such a course. On the one hand, withdrawal of Soviet military forces from the territories of most, and possibly all, of its Warsaw Pact allies is surely conceivable, as is the transformation or even dissolution of the Warsaw Pact. Soviet forces in Hungary and those introduced into Czechoslovakia since the 1968 invasion may well be withdrawn by agreement between the Soviet Union and the "host" countries even in advance of a CFE agreement. Such a withdrawal might be treated as a "down payment" against the reductions that will be required to bring Soviet force levels down to an agreed-upon ceiling. In the same way, through bilateral agreement with Warsaw, Soviet forces in Poland also may be reduced to minimal levels required to maintain lines of communication to East Germany.

On the other hand, to count on the Soviet Union to comply sheepishly with a demand by an East German government of any political persuasion to sever alliance ties and withdraw the Soviet army from the G.D.R., absent agreement on reciprocal (even if not entirely symmetrical) changes in American forces in West Germany, stretches even the most generous interpretation of the new thinking to the breaking point. Gorbachev has accepted as inevitable the dramatic upheavals that have convulsed Eastern Europe and has refrained from using force to save dying communist regimes, but it would be a mistake to assume he would be willing to see the perimeter of Soviet security interests, like the zone of communist political dominance, moved back from the Elbe to the Soviet border.

Nevertheless, the retraction of Soviet military power from Eastern Europe, and especially from East Germany, is and has been an abiding Western interest. Exploration of ways to roll back Soviet military power by negotiation and agreement is well under way. CFE should be regarded as but the first installment of such a negotiation. Moreover, agreements need not necessarily produce perfectly symmetrical outcomes. For example, given constraints and guarantees that East German territory could not be used for hostile military purposes, it is even conceivable that ultimately the Soviet Union would agree to accept a residual U.S. military presence in West Germany, even if all Soviet forces are withdrawn from the G.D.R. Such an arrangement would be compatible with "confederal structures" linking the two German states politically and economically to each other, to the European Community, and to whatever all-European institutions may evolve out of the Helsinki process. But such a benign outcome seems plausible only as the end-point of a process in which the Soviet Union has clearly participated along with the East Europeans.

As democratic governments are formed in Eastern Europe, choices affecting the pace and character of that process will be largely in the hands of the people of Eastern Europe and their freely elected governments. They could throw over restraints, leave the Warsaw Pact, and demand immediate withdrawal of all Soviet forces well before some new security structure has been put in its place. It would then be for the Soviet Union to decide whether to acquiesce or to accept the costs and risks of confrontation. One cannot preclude that the Soviets would yield in the end, but it is not a gamble the West should invite.

Of crucial importance is getting through the short run. The

present, initial stage of the liberation of Eastern Europe is the most dangerous and sensitive one (as Romania demonstrated). The Bush Administration has rightly put the main priority on helping East European reformers and opposition through this delicate period and making the loss of the Soviet empire seem as nonthreatening a prospect as possible for Moscow.

In return, the West must insist, as a minimum and indispensable condition, that the Soviets continue scrupulously to observe a policy of noninterference in domestic political processes in Eastern Europe. If Soviet military forces are not directly challenged, it is hard to see why the Soviets at this late date might choose to use force to save local Communist parties. The last good chance has long since been missed, and the costs would be astronomical.

As long as there is no such interference, continued existence of the Warsaw Pact should not be objectionable to the West on military grounds during this transition process. It is already an empty shell and no longer a useful adjunct to a Soviet offensive strategy. Indeed, its existence may be some additional insurance against surprise, serving as an early warning system for the West.

It is true that arms control and other arrangements preserving the two alliances might somehow legitimize efforts of the Soviets to maintain a military presence in Eastern Europe longer. But the spontaneous evaporation of the Soviet Union is not the most plausible alternative.

VIII

Neither Moscow nor Washington can yet see what will replace the cold-war system. The 1990s are likely to be a transitional period for relations between the two superpowers. In the multipolar world now emerging, they are likely to have more parallel and convergent interests than before. The Soviet Union, however, will find itself in radically altered circumstances that are still evolving and that could change even more radically. It now prefers gradualism and preserving existing institutions, but desperation could lead to more risky strategies. As for the United States, it needs to consult with its allies to work out a Western position before further engaging the Soviet Union on a new "architecture" for Europe.

It is misleading to conclude, however, that these new circumstances will place the superpowers on the sidelines because they no longer control events and no longer dominate their

alliances. So long as large Soviet forces remain in Eastern Europe, there can be no definitive end to the confrontation with the West and no complete solution to the German question. Some significant potential for reversing policy in Eastern Europe, by a different Soviet regime, will persist.

In this light, it is the United States alone among all NATO members that is capable of leading the Western effort to negotiate the Soviet Union out of Europe as a military presence. Reciprocal military moves to compensate Moscow will have to come chiefly from Washington. The nuclear dimension is still almost exclusively a U.S.-Soviet issue to negotiate. Finally, the United States is best positioned to broker a Western consensus on the German question and to lead in negotiating it with the Soviets.

As the United States and the Soviet Union reach the threshold of a new era in their relations, their roles in shaping the post-cold war world will be different from those they played in managing the East-West conflict, but no less crucial. Both will have to adapt their policies and behavior to environments in which they will have substantially diminished control and influence. In making this adjustment, the United States can draw on its own democratic institutions and traditions and on its long experience in heading an alliance of free and often contentious partners. For the Soviet Union, this will be an entirely new experience for which the history of its foreign relations and its domestic political traditions have poorly prepared it. In the long run, its success in adjusting to a new and constructive international role will depend on its success in transforming the Soviet system itself. It is in this sense above all that the success of perestroika is in the fundamental interest of the Western world as well as of the peoples of the Soviet Union.

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